

# Wish Walden' good luck in thinning forest bureaudracy

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A repeat of the almost total waste of wood occurring on the 500,000-acre Biscuit Fire may not happen again, if U.S. Rep. Greg Walden has his way.

Walden said during a stop in Grants Pass on Wednesday he plans to introduce legislation to speed up development of forest fire recovery plans, so there's more chance to salvage trees before they rot.

U.S. Forest Service employees were so entangled in red tape it took them two years to sell any wood from the 2002 Biscuit Fire. A total of 370 million board feet was scheduled to be harvested on a mere 3.8 percent of the land, but probably only 20 percent of that will be cut. That's because rot and bugs are expected to make the rest of the wood useless to mills after this logging season ends with November and December rains.

Other major fires that burned in federal forests in 2002 have similar recovery timelines. Each year, between 2 million and 8 million acres of federal forest burn in wildfires.

Had loggers had a year or more of that two years spent planning the Biscuit recovery, the outcome might have been considerably different. More wood could have been cut, supporting more Southern Oregon jobs — and not as many green trees would have had to be harvested to keep the mills buzzing.

Also, more acreage could have been replanted to grow into healthy forest relatively quickly, rather than left to turn into tinder-dry brush fields or slowly and haphazardly return to green forest.

Of course, changing forest management these days is about as easy as sailing the Queen Mary 2 down the Rogue River, because of environmentalists and other special interests that have a stake in the woods.

However, Walden, a Republican who represents Grants Pass, Jackson County and Eastern Oregon, has had remarkable success in this area. He wrote the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, which was passed by Congress in 2003 and streamlined the process for thinning 20 million acres of federal forest. Hopefully, this will help reduce chances of fires such as Biscuit.

Walden is also chairman of the House Resources Subcommittee on Forest and Forest Health, which shapes the nation's forest policy.

Walden said he hopes to introduce this fall his bill to streamline planning after forest fires. That may be overly ambitious, given the difficulty in changing forest management and absence of fires that might catch legislators' attention, such as the Southern California fires did two years ago.

Whenever the congressman introduces his bill, good luck to him. A precious resource shouldn't have to rot in the name of bureaucracy. And "management" that allows millions of acres of this nation's forests to turn into brush fields mustn't be allowed.

Dennis Roler